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**RESEARCH ARTICLE****PLATFORM ORGANISATIONS IN SOCIAL INNOVATION: A LOT OF OLD WINE IN A NEW BOTTLE****Maurizio Busacca***Ca' Foscari University of Venice*

**ABSTRACT:** The article investigates the influence of platform ideas, schemes, and production models outside the high-tech industry. To do this, it studies the organisational models of seven social innovation initiatives active in Italy in different sectors and promoted by different actors. The initiatives, even if non-high-tech, can be put in order as platform organisations because they host interactions between a variety of organisations and people, differently arranged with respect to them and largely autonomous and heterogeneous in terms of their interests, social networks, and purposes. The main purpose of this research has three sub-objectives. The first is to observe the development of extensive 'platformisation' processes of production systems. The second is to deepen trends in the high-tech sector through the observation of the non-high-tech sector. Finally, to create useful and usable knowledge to help political parties, trade unions, associations and governments plan solutions to protect workers of the platforms. Using a critical approach, the article reveals that these organisations are less innovative than their supporters report for three reasons.

Firstly, because the concept of community is abused to describe these organisations, which present themselves mainly as coalitions or networks because their members lack a common sense of membership; secondly, because the research downsizes the presence of prosumers and peer-to-peer production and describes production and consumption processes that take place at separate times and in which peer production is only a marginal part of the production reality. In the end, because of these organisations work thanks to the job of a small group of people with high cognitive skills and relational capital that trigger production by activating, managing and capitalising a small crowd of workers..

**KEYWORDS:** Community, Knowledge brokers, Non-high-tech platform organisations, Social innovation

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## 1. Introduction

Digital platforms have become a fundamental mode for organising a wide range of human activities, including economic, social and political interactions (Asadullah, Faik, and Kankanhalli 2018). In particular, the rise of digital platforms has transformed the landscape of multiple industries such as transportation, hospitality, and software development. In this context, digital platforms are defined as a programmable architecture designed to organise interactions between users (van Dijck, Poell, and DeWall 2018).

Following the proposal of Guarascio and Sacchi (2018), it is possible to distinguish digital platforms into capital and labor platforms: in the former, the platforms connect customers with sellers (or renters) of their own goods; in the latter, the platforms connect customers and service providers. According to the two Italian authors «the key features characterizing all types of digital platforms can be summarized as follows: provision of an online place (platform) where supply (service providers or entities offering goods) and demand come into direct contact, reducing search and transaction costs; ability to operate through the platform at any time and, in many cases, from anywhere; possibility to pay a predetermined price for micro-transactions that can be considered as minimum components of more complex tasks; intermediation and management of payments for any type of transaction» (Guarascio and Sacchi 2018: 1).

Even if the Italian context confirms the tradition of a country that does not have a strong position in advanced technology, this type of companies spread also in Italy, particularly in the sectors of advertising (Facebook, Amazon, and Google), food-delivery (e.g. Foodora and Just-it), and tourism (e.g. Airbnb). From an organisational point of view, the situation is that of companies with high levels of revenues and profits and low employment intensity. From the contractual point of view, there are very different types of relationships: in some cases, workers are collaborators, in other cases, self-employed workers who have short work relations associated with each job assigned by the platform, in other cases, workers with temporary agency contracts. In all these cases, workers receive low wages and limited social protection (Guarascio and Sacchi 2018).

This type of organisation of production, however, is no longer limited to a few high-tech organisations and is also becoming the prevalent mode of production in non-high-tech ones. Thus, today, when we talk about platforms, we are using a metaphor to describe organisations, mainly companies or parts of them, that look like flat surfaces that serve as support for other activities.

When the four characteristics outlined by Guarascio and Sacchi are present – a place where supply and demand come into contact, delayed temporality, micro-transactions, and intermediation – coworking spaces or business incubators can be described as platforms where other activities can be stacked; political movements could be described as a platforms; the description is also effective for cooperatives of professionals in which the autonomy of members is high, such as the case of SMarT.

We can summarize the current situation as follows: the concept of the platform - and its related ideas - is expanding beyond the boundaries of digital platforms and this is happening without having already developed a critical reflection on platform processes and their social impacts. Moreover, the circulation of ideas, models, schemes, and theories that are progressively transforming it into a real productive paradigm accompanies the dissemination of the metaphor of the platform. This would also explain why this concept, metaphor, and paradigm is spreading out of high-tech environments.

Sociological studies have the responsibility to try to close this hole and to develop a critical analysis of these processes and their real innovativeness.

Thus, the main purpose of this paper is to investigate the spreading of platformism outside the high-tech industry to capture the organisational peculiarities related to the reliance on platform-type organisational modes and the role of pivotal figures of workers within the organisations.

In attempting to do it, the research opted to focus the study on organisations active in the field of social innovation and on high-skilled cognitive workers. The choice of this type of worker is due to the observation of the case studies, where the organisational reconstructions highlighted a specific emphasis on their role as brokers capable of attracting participants into the organisations and influence them. From another point of view, the field of social innovation (Busacca 2019) is particularly effective in achieving this objective because the metaphorical use of the term platform is particularly strong in this sector. The term social innovation identifies initiatives that mobilize multiple actors to deal with wicked problems (Barbera and Parisi 2019) and can be defined as an emerging sector of innovation studies (van der Have and Rubalcaba 2016).

The article is organised as follows: after illustration of the design of the research (section 2), it presents seven case studies and the reasons why it treats them as platforms and thus confirms the emergence of a new production paradigm (section 3); a comparison of the seven cases reveals some organisational issues that represent the challenges of this emerging paradigm (section 4); conclusions (section 5) summarize learning and new research questions.

## 2. Research design

Lacking a broad sociological reflection on platform organisations (Arcidiacono, Gandini, and Pais 2018), the article is based on the strategy to update the knowledge produced in the scientific community since 1990 on networked and distributed organisations.

This kind of organisations could be defined as the previous socio-technical system with respect to platform organisations, enabled by the development of the first digital co-production technologies, i.e. computer and internet technologies. This strategy should favor the recovery of the findings carried out during the study of that phenomenon and reduce the delay with which this new phenomenon is analysed.

The studies over the networked and distributed organisations, primarily based on the pioneering works of Sproull and Kiesler (1991) and Bahrami (1992), have a long tradition in observing the increasing flexibility in organisations. Primarily, sociologists argued that it is wrong to consider the forms of network organisation as a hybrid of markets and/or hierarchies; rather, the forms of network organisation represent an alternative with their own logic (Powell 1990). Secondly, sociologists argued that the form of network organisation has a series of distinct advantages of efficiency as it is not owned by pure markets or pure hierarchies. In the following years, scholars dedicated themselves with an increasing commitment to network research, due to the emerging phenomenon of computer technology and, subsequently, of web-based technologies (Borgatti and Foster 2003). A few years later, scholars have been interested in collaborative productions enabled by computer networks and social network sites (Camarinha-Matos and Afsarmanesh 2005). With regard to the collaborative economy, interest in the study of commons-based peer production (Benkler and Nissenbaum 2006) is growing from when information transition costs fall almost to zero and a new form of productive social mobilization emerges as productive mode (Benkler 2017).

Recently, Arcidiacono (2019) noted that since 2013 the attention of the public debate has shifted to the issue of platforms and peer-to-peer production. The works of Andreotti (2018), Bernardi and Mura (2018), Ivaldi, Pais, and Scaratti (2018), d'Ovidio and Gandini (2019), Bandinelli and Gandini (2019), and few others, opened a successful strand of Italian sociological studies characterised by the investigation of networks and interactions between agents of social innovation initiatives operating in platform organisations. The main differences between the approaches of these authors and mine are that they focus their attention on the institutionalisation of these new social structures, while I focus my attention on the functioning of the organisations and on interactions between agents operating in these organisations. Without rejecting an institutional perspective to the study of the dissemination of platform ideas and methods —

that is, platformism — the research adopted an actor-oriented approach and focused its attention on the practices of organisation of work within collaborative non-high-tech organisations active in the field of social innovation. The practice-based research observed institutions through agents and their actions (Da Roit 2010).

The article has a comparative structure and is based on seven case studies that include very different initiatives in terms of size and fields of activity, such as the work in the cultural and creative industries, the welfare policies for families and youth as well as digital platforms for corporate welfare and social cooperatives. I collected the data from 2015 to February 2019 through prolonged periods of direct observation and in-depth interviews with people involved in the studied organisations and privileged observers. First, I used these data to elaborate single case studies, treated as paradigmatic cases and therefore rich in analytical suggestions. Afterward, I presented and discussed the single case studies during conferences and used the results as contributions – chapters and/or papers - in books and journals.

The seven case studies were selected on the basis of three criteria:

1. the organisations have to meet all the four characteristics summarised by Guarascio and Sacchi (2018);
2. under a first observation, initiatives had to appear very simple at the level of the basic organisational core - i.e. the platform - and complex for the quantity and quality of the initiatives stacked in them;
3. in documents and interviews, organisations had to present themselves explicitly as platforms or use descriptions with strong similarities to platform models.

It is the case of Multiverso, presented as a platform (*«Multiverse is an open system that has no selection at the entrance. If we talk about platform the platform is something open and Multiverso is an open system»*, Interviewed 2 – Multiverso), or the case of the Director of Lago Film Fest, that presents the organisation as a platform (*«After 10 years we started to treat differently, or maybe just with a different awareness, what we were doing before and after the festival, during the year: other projects that were just as important or maybe of another kind and scope from the economic point of view, in terms of impact and audience, but no less important for this. The aim of 'Platform Lago' is to act as an intermediary between the demands of companies, activating processes of inclusion and cohesion by placing the capabilities of the individual at the center of our activities and creating specific expertise* (Interviewed 1 - Lago Film Fest)». Even Tre Cuori is outlined as a platform: *«The welfare points are our territorial platforms»* (Interviewed 1 – Tre Cuori). In other cases, the respondents and the documents describe peer-to-peer logics and networked organisations. In the other cases, people interviewed and documents examined do not explicitly use the term platform to pre-

sent the organisations but use concepts, ideas, and tools to metaphor the organisational logic of digital platforms (see Tab. 1).

For each of the seven initiatives, I developed a case study (Sena 2016) from which I produced articles presented during conferences or contributions for books and journals. The case studies were conducted in three phases. In the first phase, a list of questions was built up to reconstruct the reasons as well as the forms of the described processes. In the second phase, I carried out focused observation and interviews. The position taken was that of the complete observer (Kawulich 2012), i.e. I attended public meetings, events, and initiatives. In order to deepen the research, the observation activity was supported by interviews<sup>1</sup> which were subsequently treated according to a grounded approach to identify some recurring themes. During the third phase, the comparative scheme was chosen as an effective strategy for trait cases. These actions were completed with the study of relevant scientific literature, gray literature and other documents produced by actors involved in social innovation practices studied.

### 3. The summary of the case studies

The seven case studies present characteristics that hybridize the three Polanyian principles of integration, i.e. market exchange, redistribution, and reciprocity, are sim-

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<sup>1</sup> The open-ended interview scheme was organised into four areas of investigation: *organisation*, in terms of work practices, decision-making processes, and workers' functions; *organisational culture*, in terms of working methods, worker participation, personal and group motivations; *innovation*, in terms of products, processes, and technologies; *institutional architecture*, in terms of network and agents. All interviews were directed to key figures of the organisations investigated by the study. Even if the interviews were open ended, the survey scheme was based on a few key questions that I list below: (Area 1) What is your organisational structure? What are the company and organisational dimensions? How are working procedures organised? Who participates in the decisions? Who participates in the production processes? Who takes the decisions? Are there elements of self-management and organisational democracy? How people share information in the organization?? (Area 2) The main ways of working between people? What does it mean to be a member of the organisation? Do you have relationships with other companies and organisations? Are there any development strategies for the organisation? Do you have criteria for recruiting new members and collaborators? Who decides the selection criteria? (Area 3) Examples of product innovation? Do you have examples of process innovation? Are there any examples of technological innovation? Who or what was decisive for the development of these innovations? Do you have an innovation management model? Who manages the logic of knowledge sharing? Do you have relationships with research centres or universities? Do you collaborate with other organizations in the development of innovations? (Area 4) Does the organisation adhere to formal or informal networks? Does the organisation collaborate on a permanent basis with other organisations? Which relationships exist between the members of the organization and between them and other external agents? Are there key people to facilitate networking? Who are they and what do they do?

ultaneously present in all initiatives. In fact, as Bagnasco noted (2017: 74) "in concrete economies, the ways of integration are generally combined with each other also coexist" (the translation is ours). In each case study, it is possible to identify a prevailing principle of integration, but it is also possible to note how the principle of reciprocity is relevant in all the cases. The following presentation of the case studies is organised on the basis of the prevailing principle of integration between the economy and society.

As illustrated in columns 3, 4, 5 and 6 of Table 1, the seven case studies present functional mechanisms compatible with those of digital platforms, adopt a mix of various digital technologies in order to design a peculiar platform environment, use both paid and unpaid workers and are platforms in which the offer of services is prevalent over the sale or rental of own assets, even if the regeneration of underused buildings (Busacca and Zandonai 2019) or the rent of coworking spaces (Ivaldi et al. 2018) have strong similarities with capital platforms. The strength of analysing seven so different cases is that it makes it possible to force comparison in order to identify convergences and divergences between cases. This strategy also reduces the confusion that analysis often produces by treating technologies as ready-to-use solutions rather than as tools that can solve problems if used in certain ways or create new problems if used in other ways.

According to this approach, the paper offers an extension of the definition of (enterprise) digital platform as an organisation that favors the interactions between a variety of entities (organisations and people) differently positioned with respect to the organisation (e.g. actual members, collaborators, external professionals, partners, suppliers, customers, inhabitant, users, prosumers,...) that are largely autonomous and heterogeneous in terms of their interests, social networks and purposes. Nevertheless, these entities work together to better achieve a common goal. Technologies are fundamental to trigger these organisational processes but they are only a tool and not the heart of the problem, which is the organisational model by itself.

In many cases the asset around which the platform is built in the territory (Lago Film Fest, Tre Cuori), in other cases it is a physical space (Officine ON/OFF, Asilo) and in others a common purpose (Piano Giovani, Alleanze per la Famiglia, Multiverso). A second common element is the governance model, which is an unformalised process based on interactions and reciprocal relations between the users of the platform rather than on formal rules, as emerges from the presentation of Multiverso: «the coworkers and the organisations that use the Multiverso spaces do not sell services but exchange services between them, without monetary transaction and they collaborate on specific projects» (Interviewed 2 - Multiverso). Another common element is the difficult coexistence between economic actions aimed at organisational sustainability and non-

economic actions aimed at enhancing trust and membership, as in the case of the Asilo («in the Asylum inhabitants cannot do activities to generate income or profit but they can use material and immaterial resources to earn income and generate profit in other places», Interviewed 1 - Asylum) or Officine ON/OFF («the cooperative 'Gruppo Scuola' has its own revenues but the groups of people who have created the thematic spaces act in different ways from voluntary work to paid activities», Interviewed 1 - Officine ON/OFF). A further common aspect is the recurring presence of people who are central figures to ensure the functioning of the organisation - «some of us spend so much time at the Asilo and support all the processes, so when we realize we have become indispensable we take a break» (Interviewed 2 - Asilo) - and that extend the working time in private life, as in the case of the Alliance for the Family: «as coordinator, my role has been continuous and has gone far beyond my normal working hours, both because many meetings have been held in the evening and because through social media the entire network of partners turned to me for any kind of information and decision» (Interviewed 4 - Alliances for Families).

This organisational model is characterised by the following features:

- First of all, there is an asset (material or intangible) that is accessible to the different actors operating on the platform (users, prosumers, consumers, peers, inhabitants,...). They play a fundamental role in curating and developing the platform as a common resource;
- Second, organisation governance is not based on a complex set of procedures and rules but rather by few norms rigidly oriented towards an ethical mission and by an informal context of relations, fostering a trust-based substrate that is functional for cooperation and collaboration;
- Third, organisational models of these organisations are characterised by the quest for a constant and dynamic balance between direct economies, generated by the management of the platform, and the non-direct economies enabled by it;
- In the end, in these organisations, one or more people have the role of community managers, who operates to enable collaborative, networked and distributed interactions, as well as the knowledge exchanges among people 'working' on the platform. They operate as "bridges" that strengthen ties.

The following table (Tab.1) summarises some of the characteristics that the description of the cases explores from an organisational point of view.



Table 1. Summary of the main attributes of the seven non-high-tech platforms

	Productive resources	Labour relations	Digital tools	Space and time	Micro-transactions	Mediators
Tre Cuori	Labour	Few salaried collaborators and many professionals collaborating with	A digital web platform of its own	Continuous exchanges in localised networks	Economical, monetary, knowledge, opportunity, trust	Owner
Multiverso	Labour, relations, coworking spaces/rooms	Few salaried collaborators and many volunteers	An own digital platform under development	Continuous exchanges in localised networks and professional community	Economical, monetary, knowledge, opportunity, trust	Owners and managers
ON/OFF	Labour, coworking spaces, classrooms, digital manufacturing machines, digital labs	Few salaried employees and many volunteers	Famous existing social networks (e.g. Facebook)	Continuous exchanges in a community of practices	Knowledge, opportunity, trust	Members of the alliance between the cooperative Gruppo Scuola, young people and the Municipality
Youth Plans	Labour, relations	A network of many salaried workers of different public and private organisations	Famous existing social networks (e.g. Facebook) and private social networks (e.g. WhatsApp)	Continuous exchanges in a professional community and community of practices	Knowledge, opportunity	Coordinators of the Plans
Alliances	Labour, relations	A network of many salaried workers of different public and private organisations	Famous existing social networks (e.g. Facebook) and private social networks (e.g. WhatsApp)	Continuous exchanges in localised networks and professional community	Knowledge, opportunity	Managers of the Alliances
Lago Film Fest	Labour, relations, territory	Few paid artistic curators and organizational directors and many volunteers	A website, famous existing social networks (e.g. Facebook and Instagram) and private social networks (e.g. WhatsApp)	Continuous exchanges in a community of intents and in a territorial network of public and private agencies	Economical, monetary, knowledge, opportunity, trust	Director and Artistic curator
Asilo Filangieri	Labour, relations, building	All Volunteers that can use the organisation's resources and social networks to obtain paid employment outside the organisation	A website and private social network WhatsApp	Continuous exchanges in a community of intents and in a community of practices	Knowledge, opportunity, trust	Members of General Thematic Tables

### **3.1. The two cases with strong entrepreneurial vocation**

**Tre Cuori** (Three Hearts) is a benefit enterprise that designed and operated a digital platform of corporate welfare.

Tre Cuori (TC) differs from other corporate welfare platforms because it operates by involving companies, social cooperatives, associations and institutions in every district where it operates, with the aim of favoring the exchange of goods, services, and resources in terms of corporate and territorial welfare. TC favours peer production processes by fostering interactions between users of different nature which together form a network whose objective is to favour work-life-balance. To address this problem, TC has developed an innovative infrastructure based on the combination of digital platform and *welfare point*: the first is the digital tool through which organisations and individuals can have access to information about available resources and opportunities and interact by exchanging goods and services; the second is a physical point where the *welfare manager* operates, giving information to the interested users and with the task of expanding the supply and the demand for goods and services by promoting the accession of new businesses, associations, social cooperatives, and local institutions.

In TC, there are several networks, coalitions and communities that, under the umbrella of a common purpose of promoting the reconciliation between life and work times, pursue different specific interests: organisational climate and productivity; purchasing power of welfare customers; new forms of aggregation of demand and new sales opportunities or financing for Third Sector organisations; and strengthening of local welfare.

**Multiverso** (Multiverse) is a for-profit company born in Florence as an evolution of a youth association active in the field of prevention of risk behaviors (such as drug and alcohol abuse).

Multiverso is a network of coworking spaces active in Tuscany and Lombardy with a strong propensity for social action and for the integration of small and large organisations to promote open innovation processes. Multiverso networks eight coworking spaces (*Florence - Campo di Marte, Carrara, Foligno, Lucca, Siena, Florence - via della Scala, Florence - via del Porcellina, and Milan*) and two other non-coworking spaces (*L'Appartamento e StartHouse*).

The organisation of the network is based on the participation of users in the management of the spaces - they open and close offices or organise initiatives in exchange for small discounts on rent - thus making them prosumers. The network spaces are hung out by new freelancers, startups, expert freelancers and micro-companies that choose to work in coworking spaces for different reasons: to increase business oppor-

tunities; to save money; to consolidate their professional identity and for simplified and flexible access to professional resources.

Even if each coworking space operates independently, it is possible to reconstruct the presence of a community of intents which identifies itself with the objective of responding concretely to the weaknesses of cognitive labor, affected by high precariousness, lack of social security and health protection and a strong dependence on demand. Multiverso has thus become an agency that produces incubation activities supporting collaboration between coworkers and new business opportunities.

The coworking managers of each space promote spinoff projects that aggregate coworkers from different spaces with other people of the territory. The most successful example is that of the local node of “L'Alveare che dice sì!”, a digital platform that supports the organisation of ethical purchasing groups.

The first two cases introduced have in common their strong entrepreneurial vocation, even if carried out in very different ways and with a different relationship with technologies.

In the case of Multiverso, at the time of the interviews, a technological platform is being studied that could intensify the interactions that occur between the inhabitants of the coworking spaces. In the case of Tre Cuori, the technological apparatus represents a constitutive element of the organisation because it is the digital platform on which most of the interactions between users occur.

At organisational level, Multiverso bases its operations on two figures - the community manager and the network manager - who have the task of fostering interactions and collaborations between users of coworking spaces and to connect them with other professional communities. Tre Cuori, on the other hand, bases its operations on the welfare manager, a social operator who continuously involves new agencies, firms, and local institutions on the platform, in order to propose a system of welfare services tailored to the needs of citizens.

### *3.2. The two cases with a strong redistributive vocation*

**Officine ON/OFF** was born in Parma in 2013 from a participatory process promoted by the Social Cooperative Gruppo Scuola to try to overcome the old model of action in the field of youth policies, based on the recreational and leisure dimension and to respond to external pressures for training and jobs. The path, made possible thanks to the funds of a local private foundation, involves the Department of Youth Policies of the Municipality of Parma and some young people, initially involved through a public

call and following through a training and co-design workshop, who formed an association, managed by young people themselves, as a model of self-management of spaces and cultural projects. Coworking was born to respond to the need to acquire entrepreneurial and digital skills. In 2014, a Fablab was also created with the participation of about fifty people who shared a year and a half of co-planning in which they first built the community and then raised the necessary funds for the start of the laboratory. In January 2016, a new structure was inaugurated as laboratory space and teaching classrooms. Finally, the last node of the network is an audio production space, made by some young people who invested time and resources in an old farmhouse to promote their work by putting equipment and space also available to others.

The **Piani di intervento in materia di politiche giovanili** (Youth Policy Action Plans) are territorial programs in the field of youth policies promoted by the Veneto Region in 2017.

The plans, programmed for 21 territorial areas, could contain three or more projects and had a variable budget depending on the number of young residents and not assigned through a competitive process based on a call for proposal. The plans asked local actors to build extensive networks and present integrated programs. This request led to the need to organise the interaction between local communities (formed by young and adults) and professional communities (youth workers, social cooperatives, and social workers of public bodies) in order to build an alliance (the plan) with the aim of strengthening youth policies in the territory. The regional programme allocated the responsibility for the plan to a municipality in each territory, thus breaking consolidated partnership schemes and entrusting the local authority with the direction of complex initiatives which saw the involvement of other municipalities, companies, social cooperatives, youth associations and other local actors of various natures, public and private, entrepreneurial and associative. The number of actors and projects in each plan are two valid indicators to detect both their ability to activate local coalitions and collaboration between local organisations, but we do not recognize the traits of a regional community of youth policies.

The **Alleanze per la famiglia** (Alliances for families) promoted by Veneto Region are a public policy for the promotion of community welfare as a strategy to develop policies of reconciliation between life and work times.

The policy model adopted by Veneto Region is based on a network system of very different actors — local authorities, associations, companies, economic categories, universities, foundations — who are asked to direct their services, encouraging convergence towards the aim of reconciling the living and working times of families. The innovative infrastructure is represented here by the Alliance, that is, a formalised network of actors sharing resources, strategies, and policies for a common purpose. This

strategy was perceived by the various actors involved as necessary to counteract the reduction of local public spending on social welfare at the local level and at the same time because it was considered effective in generating new projects born from the meeting between actors who did not communicate before.

The three cases share the central role of local public authorities both in terms of triggering the initiative and in terms of economic resources. The three initiatives have in common the use of technologies, which represent a means to achieve their respective objectives: in the case of Officine ON/OFF, advanced technologies are the object around which groups of people with a common passion and interest gather; in the case of Youth Plans and Alliances for Families, technologies are mainly digital ones dedicated to communication (Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter,...) and are used to facilitate communication within the organisation and to engage the public or to present the achieved results.

In terms of operation, the three initiatives are based on the work of three professional figures who have in common the task of building and managing communities, networks or coalitions of actors who share a general-purpose but have different value systems and have different interests: the community manager of Officine ON/OFF has many similarities with the family manager of alliances and the coordinator of the plans.

### *3.3. The two cases with a strong collaborative vocation*

**Lago Film Fest (LFF)** is a cultural festival born in 2004 with the twofold objective of revitalizing a territory and giving professional opportunities to young artists.

The LFF is today one of the most famous short-film festivals in the international circuits and has built an organisation that operates throughout the year in the production of other cultural initiatives (such as Formentera Film - International Festival of short films, documentaries and video art).

The festival is held annually along the banks of the lake of Revine-Lago, a small Venetian municipality of 2000 inhabitants. During the festival, the inhabitants actively participate in the organisation of the festival, making available and animating the public spaces of Revine-Lago and their private spaces. Their gardens become the set of meetings with authors and squares of screenings or theatrical performances. In addition, over the years, the festival organisation has consolidated a strategy of involvement of a team of volunteers that accompanies the organisation of the festival a few months earlier, thus becoming an opportunity for learning for young cultural operators.

The festival was an opportunity to bring together young artists and cultural workers with local companies. Over time, companies have evolved from simple economic sponsors into partners with whom the LFF team develops collaborative projects along with three main directions: cultural contents produced during the festival, professionals that can meet specific needs of firms, production of content commissioned by companies.

The LFF thus becomes a platform on which citizens, artists, and firms meet and interact with each other: for artists, it offers employment opportunities, for enterprises it offers creative content and access to international cultural production value chains, and for the territory, it offers innovative trajectories of local development.

The **Ex Asilo Filangieri** is the first and until now the most important case in Italy of regeneration of community assets without adopting proprietary or market institutional forms.

The tradition of regenerated spaces for social purposes shows two prevailing forms of institution: one is based on public ownership that manages the asset involving organised and non-organised citizens; another is based on the transfer of the right of use to a third party with a legal personality. The innovation of Asilo is represented by the fact that ownership and management remain public but the asset is carried out through a third party organisation arranged in a non-institutional but legal form through an assembly mechanism.

The Asilo community was created to respond to the weakness of cultural workers and that community identified in the unused space of the Ex Asylum Filangieri the ideal place to transform into a place of life and work, to give support to cultural workers. Asilo is not an enterprise and does not give rise to work activities. The only form of income that the Asilo accepts for its users is indirect, that is, they can use for free the instruments of production of the Asilo community also for commercial and professional activities outside of space.

The assembly is the place where the Asilo community discusses and makes decisions on issues affecting the entire organisation. The tables are smaller thematic assemblies in which people interested in specific issues, problems or proposals participate. At the users' level, Asilo has defined three forms of participation: the inhabitants, that are those who take responsibility for certain areas of work; the users, that are people who propose and manage activities within the space; visitors, that are the people who participate as an audience in the activities. This mix of assembly spaces and organisational roles and functions is configured as an ecology of relations based on the care of human and personal relationships.

In these two initiatives, collaborative aspects are prevalent, and economic issues become residual compared to social ones. The relationship with technologies is functional, that is, they are used when they are fundamental to achieving organisational goals.

This is the case, for example, of the use of digital coins by the Asilo to circumvent the obstacle of the lack of a formalized organisational structure.

At the organisational level, two types of professional figures emerge: the first is that of a researcher in action, researchers in universities or research centers who actively participate in initiatives contributing to the production of knowledge and thus promoting processes of continuous learning; the second is that of policy entrepreneurs, who are configured as social innovators who mobilize knowledge and actors in an innovative sense.

#### **4. Brokers, workers, and communities... but innovation is weak**

Research highlights that in these organisations operate three key figures that are similar to the community manager (Ivaldi et al. 2018). The first is that of the social innovator, that is, an agent of change capable of combining market principles, public principles, and collective scopes (Barbera and Parisi 2019). The second figure is that of the researcher in action, that is, a cognitive worker who adopts action research strategies to produce knowledge in the course of the action and promote reflexive action (Busacca 2018). The third figure is that of the knowledge broker, whose work is to promote the wide circulation of knowledge produced for innovation (Busacca 2019b). All these figures activate high cognitive skills and high endowments of social capital, configuring themselves as high-skilled workers that promote social production (Arvidsson 2008).

This describes an organisational model where few high-skilled workers operate as brokers (Burt 1992) and are able to mobilize a multitude of actors whose interactions trigger the social production. These organisations, therefore, while not reaching the ability to mobilize a crowd of workers with the intensity of digital platforms, are characterized by their ability to produce value also through unpaid work and time, mobilizing a small crowd that is often associated with the concept of community. This is largely due to their ability to use socialization technologies but is supported by the ability to mobilize the ethical dimension of initiatives (Arvidsson 2009) and by the ability to activate complex social networks of its users and producers. These technologies, combined with the ability to mobilize ethics and the social capital of individuals, make more effective forms of collaborative networked and distributed production than Taylorist forms of organisation which still characterize a large part of the organisations involved in social innovation initiatives, where functions and roles are determined in a hierarchical order. Three forms of participation in the platform are outlined. The first form is repre-

sented by a small number of high-skilled workers who promote social production by mobilizing many actors. The second is formed by a large number of agents participating in social production without direct and immediate gain, with different purposes, waiting to benefit from indirect economies and/or for strong ethical motivation. The third form is constituted by the final beneficiaries of the initiatives, which do not always correspond to the second group, but in some cases are passive consumers of products. One notable aspect is the limited relevance of the phenomenon of prosumers in favor of more traditional forms of production and consumption. In fact, the prosumer should produce and sell part of its surpluses to other users of the platform, while in these experiences the functions of production and consumption are mostly separate and managed by different actors.

These organisations have also another counter-trend to innovation: they show traditional forms of ownership. In fact, associations, enterprises, cooperatives or local authorities present few and limited elements of innovation and therefore present an old wine in a new bottle. The original formula of the civic use of an indivisible collective asset of the Asilo (De Tullio 2018) is the only one that openly contests the concept of ownership without sacrificing organisation. The others are more traditional attempts of network organisations or coalitions of actors. The innovative element is rather attributable to the use of new technologies to extend the number of actors and the time they spend in production. In summary, if in terms of collaborative orientation, technological endowment, ownership forms, and the relationship between community and innovation, these experiences are consistent with trends in the act of large-scale dissemination of social production, what distinguishes their practices from the rhetoric is that the experiences are adopting an organisational model based on a few high-skilled workers occupying top positions and a crowd of unpaid or underpaid workers who feed social production. This happens in the absence of a visible conflict between the few high-skilled workers of the platform and the many others working on it. As Busso and Gargiulo (2017) pointed out about the Third Sector, this process of sterilizing the conflict takes place at several levels: the first level relates to the purposes of the organisations, where there is no explicit reference to actors or models of action to replace but a more generic search for new models of society; the second level is that of the speeches produced by these organisations where the reflection on collaboration prevails as a strategy to promote the production of products or processes of innovations without giving rise to explicitly subversive discursive practices, that is, as if they were able to understand innovation only as a doing of something new and not as a new way of doing; the third level is the internal one, wherewith the exception of Asilo Filangieri - the power relations between the users of the platform, which are presented as actors who



participate in the production of innovation without any form of conflict or tension with the other participants are never questioned.

Another relevant finding is that these organisations radically change the typical organisational form of the Third Sector, i.e. the form of an hourglass — with a compact team of professionals working between a wide audience and a large audience of shareholders (or funders) — and turn it into an inverted tree — where a small number of *community managers* working as brokers create the conditions because a large number of agents (a crowd) can participate in (social) production — creates the conditions for the consideration about the need to distinguish between workers who have the skills and the power to mobilize social production and workers - mostly middle-skilled - participating in it. The hypothesis emerging from this analysis is that in platforms the forms of work and the power embedded in those forms have an intensive relational nature. In fact, these workers use their high skills to create conditions for other workers and volunteers to participate in social production. To do this, they use a rich repertoire of skills that are mobilized around three key resources: time, knowledge, and relationships.

**Time** is a resource they use both because processes based on a few rules and many relationships require a long time and because the heterogeneity of the actors involved in the organisations requires different strategies for contacting them. Frequent use of WhatsApp or Telegram groups as forms of coordination that replace meetings in presence produces, for example, the phenomena of invasion of work in lifetimes. Interestingly, this phenomenon is not only present in productive organisations with market vocation but is also a common trait for all public and private organisations, both economic and non-economic. Although with many differences, the strong overlap between life and work times of the users of Lago Film Fest and Asilo Filangieri - where work, not work, volunteering and militancy are confused - creates a slippage of private life towards that of production.

**Knowledge** is also a resource that is mobilized at three levels. A first level is that of expert knowledge, where specialists, experts, consultants, and researchers contribute to the production of paying great attention to the production of knowledge during the action through forms of action-research and reflective research. The second level of knowledge is the common one, which emerges from the development of participatory processes involving non-expert citizens. At the third level, expert and common knowledge are combined to analyse contexts, to map resources - in terms of actors and competences - and to mobilise these actors to deal with common challenges.

**Personal relationships** are the third and perhaps most influential resource for explaining the way in which social production is triggered. With strong analogies with the

debate on the commodification of care services (Leira and Saraceno 2002), the sociological analyses tend to conflate the commodification of social work with the marketization of social work, neglecting the fact that in-state, community or third sector initiatives, workers are paid and therefore their work is necessarily commodified. Those analyses also ignore the importance of voluntary work - based on relationships and socially produced and exchanged knowledge - for the ability of these initiatives to perform effectively.

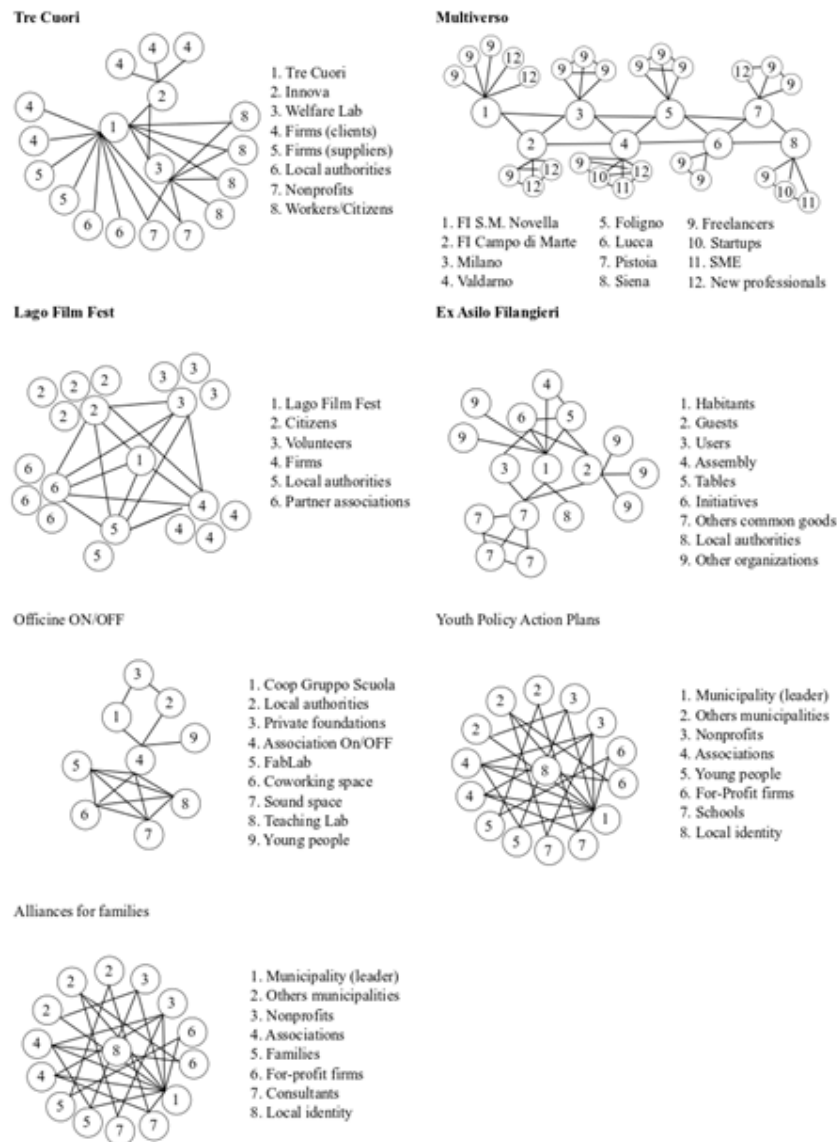
The common belonging of many of the participants in these initiatives to common political, territorial and cultural subcultures facilitates processes of trust that are crucial for accepting to interact with communities, such as coalitions and networks that have different value systems and aims. The theme of trust is recurrent in the reconstructions of these initiatives and is used to explain the keeping of some multi-purpose agreements. This trust is attributed to key figures who are described as competent, consistent and reliable by virtue of their direct knowledge gained from past experience. The relationships of knowledge, friendship, and affection among the participants of these initiatives are a characteristic feature and can be used to explain the strength of these networks and coalitions even in the presence of divergent aims and interests that are only slightly convergent. Seen from a different point of view, it is also possible to affirm that these initiatives use personal relationships and affections as a multiplier of agents who participate in social production.

The reconstruction of these seven cases questions one of the most characteristic concepts of platform ideas and models: the community. In common language, platforms are represented as communities in which users (both producers and consumers) interact with each other, exchanging information, goods, knowledge, and services. This idea contrasts with the sociological tradition which has shown that communities are mostly closed and conservative social organisations, careful to detect and punish behaviours that differ from the rules, i.e. innovative. This puts the observer in front of a double hypothesis: a) the new organisational models are able of changing the nature of the communities, or b) what we are facing are not communities.

The in-depth analysis of the seven initiatives deepened in the article and their organisational processes (Figure 1) suggests an answer. Platform organisations are not communities but they host or connect communities, i.e. are configured as multi-purpose coalitions (or networks) that could interconnect some communities. Weber (1978) defined the community as a society whose action rests on a common belonging subjectively perceived by the individuals participating in it and which can be based on any kind of foundation: emotional or traditional. What is very weak in these organisations - with the exception of Lago Film Fest and Asilo Filangieri - is a generalized sense of belonging to a community, which is replaced by the convergence of interests and/or

scopes by parts of small communities interconnected with each other thanks to the work of some key figures working as knowledge brokers (Burt 1992).

Figure 1. Platform organisations as networked and distributed organisation



The case of the Youth Plans presents some interviews that attest the misunderstanding of the concept of community and transforms it into a quasi-synonym of network: «community it is not only the network between the municipality and the cooperative but the fact of having worked together with the cooperatives to create the Plan, agreeing on it was positive [...] The fact of reproducing the projects in 4 territories, meant that the cooperatives felt among themselves, exchanged contacts, exchanged physical places, hosted each other. And this is wealth. The network, from all points of view, will certainly produce this collaboration» (Interviewed 4 – Youth Plans). Also the protagonists of the Asylum, where the dimension of membership is relevant, tend to confuse the concepts of community and network: «the local network (10 spaces) is active in encouraging the circulation of social and cultural productions. This is done through the Network dei Beni Comuni (Common Goods) and the sharing of the activity programmes of the various spaces. The self-governing table of the Asilo, for example, is open both to the internal community of the inhabitants of the Asilo and to the city community, in order to ensure that the city issues and the internal ones are constantly aligned with each other» (Interviewed 1 – Asilo).

## 5. Conclusions

In this article, we highlighted that the analysed organisations are configured as platforms that favour the interactions between a variety of organisations and people differently positioned with respect to the organisation and that are largely autonomous and heterogeneous in terms of their interests, social networks, and purposes. As we have seen, these organisations translate the mechanisms, schemes and organisational models of digital platforms into non-digital organisations. The trait common to the organisations presented above is that a small group of individuals with high-cognitive-skills and high-relational-capital trigger social production by fostering a crowd of workers and/or volunteers.

Another finding that the analysis has shown is that the concept of community is abused to describe these organisations, which appear mainly as coalitions or networks because their members lack a common sense of association. Rather, the platforms are configured as multi-purpose coalitions or networks interconnecting communities. Also, the influence of prosumerism and peer-to-peer production is re-dimensioned by this research, which instead shows how organisational ideas developed around the concepts of networked and distributed organisations are still effective in describing pro-

duction and consumption processes taking place in separate moments and in which peer-production is only a marginal part of the production process.

This finding helps us to note that there is still a lot of old wine in the new bottle because organisations present a few new ideas and they rather adopt models and especially technologies that enhance their production capacity.

The other theme that emerges from this research and that helps us outline some new research questions is the importance of new professional figures - social innovators, knowledge brokers and researchers in action - who participate in social production from an apical position mobilizing three personal resources and consequently self-generating extended forms of life subsumption (Fumagalli 2017). This vital activation mobilizes a crowd of agents who, albeit with different purposes, participate in social production. This mechanism determines the emergence of three new research questions. At the individual level, it becomes important to understand what effects this kind of activation produces. At the organisational level, the importance of studying which forms of agency and which types of power relations are observable in this type of organisation emerges. At the system level, it asks a question about its ability to be a young plant from which new ways of production will be born.

The main contribution this research offers to studies on digital platforms is that it highlights the importance of organisational phenomena not strictly related to digital technologies but that in the context of digital platforms reveal their maximum level of implementation. Digital technologies can be identified as tools that foster the application of organizational cultures and production models that are highly relational, triggered by the growing importance of open innovation schemes (Chesbrough, Vanhaverbeke, and West 2006) in production systems. More than the technology, it is the importance of relational chains for innovation (Collins 2005) that explains the network orientation of the organizations. Studies on digital platforms are frequently conditioned by the centrality of technological issues and relegate organisational arrangement and organizational logics to the background. In this way, technology becomes the pillar and the goal of organizations, while our sociological approach suggests that technology is a tool to pursue a culturally and socially defined goal, i.e. the socialization of production. We can say, that this study puts digital technologies back in their place after that for many years these have been considered an organizational objective *a priori* positive or negative. Our opinion is that technologies do not pursue their own objectives but incorporate socially defined objectives and transpose them into complex organisational contexts. In other words, with this study we recover the idea of the social construction of the innovation (Trigilia 2007). The study of non-high tech organisations helped us to develop this thesis and now it can be applied to high tech organisations.

This analytical proposal helps scholars and social organizations (especially trade unions and political parties) to answer some key questions, in order to decide how to approach the phenomenon of the spread of platform organizations both within and outside the boundaries of the digital economy. At the individual level, it becomes important to understand what effects this kind of activation produces. At the organisational level, the importance of studying which forms of agency and which types of power relations are observable in this type of organisation emerges. At the system level, it asks a question about its ability to be a young plant from which new ways of production will be born. Thus, the article raises some questions that may be useful suggestions for trade unions, representative associations, parties and other agencies that will decide to try to protect these new forms of work organisation. The first question concerns the reconciliation not only between life and work times but also between life, work and relationships. It is a question of extending the reflection on the work-life balance (Maino and Ferrera 2013) to the sphere of personal relationships that are simultaneously productive (and vice versa), in order to try to formulate new geography of industrial relations in organisations that extremize networked and distributed organisational models. The second question concerns the role of new professional figures who have not yet been coded or protected until now. These workers present themselves as hybrid workers, who in part adopt behaviours similar to those of self-employers (Bologna and Fumagalli 1997) and partly similar to managers in hybrid organisations. The trend that seems to emerge highlights an original movement. After that, for many years, the push has been to outsource some functions of cognitive production that require high levels of autonomy and entrepreneurship. Today, however, the organisational model of the platform seems able to bring these functions back into the organisation, thus inviting scholars to return to the study of organisations.

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